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ABSTRACT

A survey was conducted to determine how much and under what conditions students read voluntarily. Subjects, 844 secondary students, completed a questionnaire that was then analyzed using the Crosstabulation Subprogram of "Statistical Package for the Social Sciences" to correlate results with students' sex, grade level, scholastic achievement, and ethnicity. Among the results were the following: (1) newspapers were selected as the most important kind of voluntary reading by 67.5% of the students; (2) grade level is a significant factor in choice of topic (such as sports, comics, or news) in newspapers; and (3) novels were the favorite type of publication for voluntary reading, while newspapers were second in popularity. News and comics were cited as most frequently read sections of the paper, while only 18% of the subjects read editorials. Responses to the questions varied according to subjects' sex, grade level, scholastic achievement, and ethnicity. The clearest implication of this study is that newspapers offer the classroom teacher concerned about reading improvement a unique resource. (Eight tables of findings are included). (DF)

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STUDENTS READ NEWSPAPERS: WHO, WHAT, AND WHY

by

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STUDENTS READ NEWSPAPERS: WHO, WHAT, AND WHY

This report is drawn from a survey of 844 secondary school students who responded to a questionnaire on their voluntary reading and the conditions under which they read. The students were in grades six through twelve in ten schools, public and parochial, in the New York metropolitan area, specifically in the Bronx and Westchester county.

The data were analyzed using the Crosstabulation Subprogram of Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) to correlate the results with the students' sex, grade level, scholastic achievement, and ethnicity. The signficance level used was .05 or lower, determined by either chi-square or Yates' corrected chi-square.

This report analyzes voluntary newspaper reading by students and discusses implications of the results for the classroom.

Who Reads Newspapers?

More students reported that they read newspapers voluntarily than any other type of publication. Newspapers were read by 744 (88.2%) of the responding students. Neither sex, grade level, scholastic achievement nor ethnicity was shown to be a significant factor in whether or not students read newspapers.

The high percentage of students who read newspapers provides a contrast to reading interest surveys: In the same survey from which these data were drawn, students listed news sixteenth of

fifty-eight topics and current events twenty-first.

Do Students Consider Newspapers Important?

Newspapers were selected as the most important kind of voluntary reading by 570 (67.5%) of the students. Of those who reported that they read newspapers, 543 (73%) considered newspapers most important. Again, no significant differences were shown based on sex, grade level, scholastic achievement or ethnicity.

A crosstabulation of the students who read newspapers with the students who consider the newspaper most important showed that 27 students who did not report reading newspapers voluntarily nevertheless considered the newspaper the most important kind of voluntary reading.

Are Newspapers Read Frequently?

The students were asked what type of publication they read voluntarily most often. Newspapers were the most often read of 336 students (39.8%). Of the 744 students who read newspapers voluntarily at all, 328 (44.1%) read newspapers most often. Newspapers are the most often read publication of the largest number of students.

The responses to this question were significantly affected by sex, grade level, scholastic achievement, and ethnicity. Table I presents a summary of the data.

TABLE I

Percentage Reporting Newspaper as Most Frequently Read Type of Publication
By Sex, Grade Level, Scholastic Achievement, and Ethnicity

		SEX		GRADE LEVEL							SCHOLASTIC ACHIEVEMENT					ETHNICITY		
	OVERALL	MALE	FEMALE	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	A	B	C	D	F	BL	HIS	OTH
Percentage	44.1	61.9	38.1	29.2	38.1	44.8	31.3	50.0	47.9	58.5	29.6	44.2	55.0	49.0	30.0	49.3	53.1	40.6
Newspaper Chosen Most=*	*	*	*	*#	*	*		*	*	*		*	*	*	*	*	*	*

*#=tied with short story collections

n=744
p=.05

Table I shows that newspapers are the most frequently read publication for a much higher percentage of males than females, 61.9% to 38.1%. This disparity may reflect a number of differences: It is possible that female students read a greater diversity of materials voluntarily than males do; it is possible that males favor "practical" reading like newspapers; it is possible that males' greater interest in reading about sports draws them to the newspaper for recreational reading (see Table IV).

The differences by grade level show a general rise in newspapers as the most frequently read publication associated with a rise in grade level. The one exception is grade 9. From grade 6 through grade 12, the percentage rises from 29.2% to 58.5%. It falls from 44.8% in grade 8 to 31.3% in grade 9, then rises to 50% in grade ten. Since the only other dip is 2.1% from grade 10 to grade 11, the 13.5% decline is noteworthy. A possible, although speculative, interpretation of the pattern is that the sixth-grade students demonstrate the last stage of interest in children's literature. The easily available newspaper begins to dominate their reading until they are introduced to serious adult literature in the ninth grade or become involved with adolescent literature of the kind that appeals mature to adolescents. (The survey shows that widespread interest in the novel is raised, but continues in later grades only in some students.) The continuing pattern of increased preference for newspapers is interrupted, then, only in grade 9.

When scholastic achievement is considered, the "A" and "F"

students show significantly lower percentages of students who read the newspaper most frequently than other students. For the "F" students, at 30%, the newspaper is still the most frequently read of any publication, but for the "A" students, at 29.8%, the newspaper trails the novel. This indicates a scattering of interests among the "F" students, a concentration of interest among the "A" students.

The difference between the ethnic minority groups in the survey--blacks and Hispanics--and the "other" students is that a significantly lower percentage of "other" students report that the newspaper is the publication they read most often. Further investigation of this result is needed.

Are Newspapers the Favorite Type of Publication?

The favorite type of publication for voluntary reading in the sample was the novel, chosen by 23.7% of the students, followed by newspapers, chosen by 186 students, or 22%. Of the 744 students who reported any voluntary reading of newspapers, they were the favorite of 177 (23.8%). Table II shows the percentages of the 177 students who read newspapers who selected newspapers as their favorite type of publication as significantly affected by sex, grade level, scholastic achievement, and ethnicity.

TABLE II

Percentage Of Students Who Read Newspapers Selecting Newspapers as Favorite Publication
By Sex, Grade Level, Scholastic Achievement, and Ethnicity

		SEX		GRADE LEVEL							SCHOLASTIC ACHIEVEMENT					ETHNICITY		
	OVERALL	MALE	FEMALE	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	A	B	C	D	F	BL	HIS	OTH
Percentage	23.8	35.5	15.6	37.5	18.0	25.2	15.3	27.7	21.0	35.6	13.2	24.2	30.8	26.9	11.1	27.0	31.0	21.2
Newspaper Chosen Most=*	*	*		*		*		*		*			*	*		*	*	

n=744
p=.05

In every group on Table II, the percentage of students rating newspapers as their favorite type of voluntary reading is considerably lower than the percentage rating newspapers as the most often read. This may indicate that the newspaper is most often read because of convenience: easy availability and the short time required to read a single item. On the other hand, this report shows that many students believe in the importance of newspaper reading.

Newspapers were the favorite of a far larger percentage of males than of females, 35.5% to 15.6%. Males placed newspapers first; females placed novels first, newspapers second.

The pattern for grade level is complex. The drop in grade 9 is predictable from Table I, but not the high percentage for grade 6unless the transition from children's literature contributes to the percentage. The sharp decline in grade 7 eludes explanation. The other grade levels show a vacilating preference for novels and newspapers with no discernible pattern based on grade level. The same kind of vacilation seems to occur with respect to different levels of scholastic achievement except the lowest.

The groups divided by ethnicity show that blacks and Hispanics selected newspapers as their favorite significantly more than "others." Note, however, that ethnicity has little effect on what students read in the newspaper (see Table IV).

What Do Students Read in Newspapers?

Reading newspapers is like reading anything else: Reading may be on any level, about any topic, for any purpose. The

students in the sample reported nine different topics which they read about or sections which they read in newspapers. Table III shows the number and percentage of the 744 students who read newspapers reading each of these.

TABLE III

Topics or Sections Read in Newspapers

TOPIC OR SECTION	NUMBER	PERCENTAGE
News	549	73.8
Comics	508	68.3
Sports	380	51.8
TV Section	374	50.3
Features and Human Interest	354	47.6
Ads	309	41.5
Columns	260	34.9
Reviews	243	32.7
Editorials	135	18.1

n=744

Table III shows that news and comics lead and that columns, reviews, and editorials are last. Table IV presents an analysis by sex, grade level, scholastic achievement, and ethnicity which permits more detailed comments. Where no percentage is given, the results are not significant.

TABLE IV

Percentage of Students Reading Topics or Sections of Newspapers
By Sex, Grade Level, Scholastic Achievement, and Ethnicity

		SEX		GRADE LEVEL							SCHOLASTIC ACHIEVEMENT					ETHNICITY		
	OVERALL	MALE	FEMALE	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	A	B	C	D	F	BL	HIS	OTH
News	73.8			40.0	58.2	67.8	72.6	82.8	77.2	81.7	80.0	57.4	70.1	78.2	77.8	66.7	78.2	74.6
Comics	68.3	64.7	71.6	80.0	83.6	66.9	65.8	71.0	61.7	65.8	40.0	59.3	70.1	78.2	77.8			
Sports	51.8	75.9	29.4	28.0	58.2	39.7	34.2	69.7	55.0	52.5								
TV Section	50.3			44.0	65.7	47.9	50.4	62.1	35.6	49.2								
Features and Human Interest	47.6	40.5	54.1	12.0	25.8	36.4	53.0	54.5	51.7	54.2	50.0	37.0	42.7	49.2	59.0			
Ads	41.5			20.0	44.8	31.4	44.4	38.6	45.0	50.8								
Columns	34.9	28.2	41.1	20.0	23.9	24.0	33.3	46.9	38.3	37.5	40.0	16.7	28.2	39.1	47.0			
Reviews	32.7	27.3	37.6	12.0	26.0	20.7	39.3	33.8	38.3	37.5	30.0	18.5	26.5	36.0	45.3	25.8	28.5	37.2
Editorials	18.1	14.9	21.1	4.0	9.0	9.1	29.9	16.6	18.1	25.8	10.0	9.3	13.7	22.7	20.5			

Blanks indicate no significant result.

n=744
p=.05

Table IV shows that a greater percentage of females than males read each topic for which sex is a significant factor except for sports, where males lead, 75.9% to 64.7%. This trend holds true even for comics, where females lead 71.6% to 64.7%. (The same is not true for comic books.)

Grade level is a significant factor in each of the topics read, but statistical significance does not guarantee a causal relationship or a pattern which can be explained. For the teacher interested in starting points for class work with the newspaper, however, the grade level table can help predict what students are apt to be reading voluntarily. Such prediction can be made more confidently by reference to the other characteristics on Table IV as well.

The reading of news generally rises with grade level, showing a pronounced peak in grade 10. Peaks such as this may be influenced by the curriculum, but the steady rise is almost certainly linked to age and maturity--students see more and more that the news affects them personally and are broadening their interests generally. A similar pattern may be seen for editorials, but here the peak is in grade 9 and is far more pronounced.

Columns, like news, peak in grade 10; reviews, like editorials, peak in grade 9. Features and human interest are read by a generally rising percentage of students as grade level rises, although the rise is characterized by three plateaus rather than by a steady increase.

The percentage of students reading about sports also

generally rises with grade level, displaying two very prominent peaks at grades 7 and 10. (Interest in sports peaks at age 13 and 16 according to the general reading interest which was part of this research.)

The students' scholastic achievement does not affect those areas of newspaper reading we might label "non-academic" except for comics. The latter is read by a greater percentage of students as academic achievement rises. The successful student is characterized by the breadth of his or her interests, not by what he or she avoids. News, features and human interest, columns, reviews and editorials all show a rise with increased academic success. But this rise is qualified in one way: It begins with students with a "D" average and continues through the "A" students. The "F" students read news more than any other group, features and human interest and columns more than all but the "A" students, reviews more than the "C" and "D" students, and editorials slightly more than the "D" students. (See "Classroom Implications," below.)

The most striking characteristic of the effects of ethnicity is that it affects only two of the topics: news and reviews. Blacks indicated less reading of the news than "others"; Hispanics more. Further research might indicate whether these results reflect the students' perceptions of how strongly the news is related to them and their communities.

The Last Prior Voluntary Reading

At the end of the questionnaire, the students were asked about the last time they read voluntarily outside of school. Of

the 712 students who responded to this portion of the survey, 183 (25.7%) reported that they had read newspapers. (This put newspapers second to novels.) Tables V, VI, and VII present the responses of the 183 students who had read the newspaper last. In some cases the number is lower because some students did not respond to all the questions. The percentages listed reflect the total number of students responding, not merely those whose responses are listed.

Table V shows the topics read by at least five the the responding students. Responses were limited to one topic per student.

TABLE V

Topics Read at Last Reading

TOPIC	NUMBER	PERCENTAGE
Sports	44	24.4
News	15	8.3
Current Events	8	4.4
Love	8	4.4
Teenagers	8	4.4
Romance	7	3.9
History	6	3.3
Fashions	6	3.3
Adventure	5	2.8
Mystery	5	2.8
Movies	5	2.8

n=180

Table VI shows the influences, on or reasons for, the choice of what to read last which were listed by at least five students.

TABLE VI

INFLUENCE OR REASON	NUMBER	PERCENTAGE
Interest in Subject	66	37.5
Student Wanted to Learn	22	12.5
It Looked Good to Read	16	9.1
Student Needed the Knowledge	10	5.7
It Looked Exciting	8	4.5
Friend's Recommendation	5	2.7

n=183

Table VI shows that the only external influence was the recommendation of a friend, not of a parent or teacher. But teacher influence may underlie interest in subject, wanting to learn, and needing the knowledge.

Table VII shows the conditions to which at least five students attributed their having read a newspaper when they last read. State of mind is not included; it is reported in Table VIII.

TABLE VII

Conditions Prompting Reading of Newspapers

CONDITION	NUMBER	PERCENTAGE
Student Has the Time	46	26.3
Student Found Something to read	37	21.1
Student Was Alone	18	10.3
Student Was Eating Alone	10	5.7
Something to Read Caught Student's Eye	10	5.7
The Weather Was Bad	9	5.1
Student Was in the Middle of Reading Something	6	3.4
Nothing on TV	5	2.9

n=175

Students in the survey (not only newspaper readers) reported that they are most likely to read when they have the time, when they are alone, when they find something good to read, when the weather is bad, when there is nothing they want to watch on

television, when a piece of reading material catches their eye, when they are already in the middle of reading something, when they are eating alone, and when they are listening to music. Table VII shows that the conditions under which students read newspapers closely parallel the conditions under which they read in general.

Finally, what is the state of mind, the thought or feeling, which students say prompted them to read the newspaper? Table VIII lists those selected by at least five students.

TABLE VIII

States of Mind Prompting Reading of Newspaper

STUDENT'S STATE OF MIND	NUMBER	PERCENTAGE
Is Bored	40	22.6
Really Feels Like Reading	20	11.3
Has Nothing Else to Do	14	7.9
Likes to Read	13	7.3
Wants to Enjoy	13	7.3
Wants to Relax	12	6.8
Wants to Do Something Worthwhile	10	5.6
Wants to Pass the Time	9	5.1
Wants to Take a Break	7	4.0
Wants to Become Cultured	6	3.4
Wants to Fall Asleep	5	2.8

n=177

Of the 149 responses listed on Table VIII, 87 (58.4%) may be considered passive--boredom, relaxation, etc. Of course, people read to pass the time. But when twice as many students say they last read the newspaper to alleviate boredom as say they read because they really wanted to, then we must ask what kind of school activities can appropriately be based on such reading.

A sentence constructed of the most popular responses of the students who read the newspaper when they last read voluntarily outside of school would say, "I read about sports in the newspaper because I'm really interested in sports, because I had time, and because I was bored." Voluntary reading is strongly based on interest in a topic, but the choice to read seems more a response to the lack of other stimuli than a response to the desire to read itself.

Classroom Implications

The clearest implication of this report is that newspapers offer the teacher interested in reading improvement a unique resource. A high percentage of students--even those whose scholastic achievement is low--already read newspapers voluntarily. Even more important is the fact that over half of the students, including those who do not read them on their own, consider newspapers the most important reading they could do. Newspaper reading for class could provide disaffected students with a school activity which meets their own criterion of importance. For the reading specialist and the teacher of classes of reluctant readers, units of instruction that include the newspaper might bridge the gap between what the school and

the students perceive as useful. Many newspapers around the country are concerned with their classroom potential, working with the schools, holding seminars, and preparing special educational supplements.

Referring to Table IV could help the teacher predict what sections of the newspaper particular groups of students are apt to be reading and, therefore, are least apt to resist. Conversely, the teacher may wish students to discover sections they do not currently read but which they will find interesting. We do not know why sixth-graders tend not to read features and human-interest articles, but we know from their interests that they should find such reading appealing.

There is another use for knowing what students do not read. English teachers, for example, often refer to newspaper advertisements when working with semantics. But only one-fifth of the students in grade six reported reading advertisements in newspapers. The unit would have greater impact in later grades.

The pattern of the lowest group of students academically, "F" students, is exceptionally useful, for these are the students we know least about. We know that they are not all "low ability" students. An "F" average is more likely to indicate alienation than inability. Their high frequency of reading news, features, and columns indicates that they are focused on the world they are about to enter, not the academic world they are in. For the teacher flexible enough, the newspaper might be the single most useful reading material for such students. And the newspaper is rich enough to provide much more than practice material for

reading improvement. It could be the social studies, literature, and English language textbook.

When students read newspapers voluntarily, they do so primarily for recreation--to pass the time. Teachers interested in fostering newspaper reading should also foster the attitude that while newspaper reading is rewarding, it is not primarily a school assignment. Out-of-school reading is strongly based on interest in a topic; therefore, it is more important to broaden the students' range of interests than to exhort them to read: only 8.8% of the students surveyed reported being influenced to read by the study of newspapers in school. Students already consider news and current events the most important topics to read about, and they already read the newspaper in great numbers. Working with the newspaper, then, does not involve trying to lead students where they do not want to go. We should attempt to improve their reading of those sections they already read, help them discover those sections they are ready for but do not read on their own, and--as always--raise their awareness of and interest in the world around them.

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